

# **Wildlife Viewing Recreation: Economic Stimulant and Habitat Protection Tool**

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## **Abstract**

Recreationists engaged in wildlife viewing spend nearly \$1 billion annually in Washington, primarily in rural areas. The result is a boost to rural economies and an improving attitude toward habitat protection and resource stewardship. This spending is fueled by the changing recreational preferences of aging Baby-Boomers, and a growing interest among rural communities to attract wildlife-viewing tourists. To attract visitors to see wildlife, communities must retain their wildlife. This dual potential of economic development and resource stewardship is the focus of the nation's first legislatively mandated statewide plan for wildlife viewing.

## **State Wildlife Viewing Plan**

The goals of wildlife viewing programs are: promote sustainable economic development; promote habitat conservation; and build broad-based public support for wildlife conservation programs.

This was formalized in 2003, when the Washington Legislature Passed SB 5011 stating "The departments of fish and wildlife and community, trade and economic development are directed to host a conference on wildlife viewing tourism, working with interested local governments, state agencies, and stakeholders. "The objective ... shall be adoption of a strategic plan and specific implementing actions for promotion of wildlife viewing tourism in a manner that provides sustainable rural economic development and maintains wildlife diversity." Implicit from the outset is the dual intent: economic return and wildlife protection.

A conference to develop the basis for the plan was held in Olympia in September 2003, and drew 150 engaged participants representing all levels of government, local nonprofits, and Chambers of Commerce and tourism vendors.

The driving principles from the feedback of the conference participants are: Washington State's varied geography, climates, and ecosystems have created one of the richest and most diverse habitats in the nation, giving rise to over 640 vertebrate species, including 365 bird species; and thousands of invertebrates. Let's keep it that way!

We currently have an active and growing participation in wildlife viewing activities, with a consequent growth in communities wanting to capitalize on this interest.

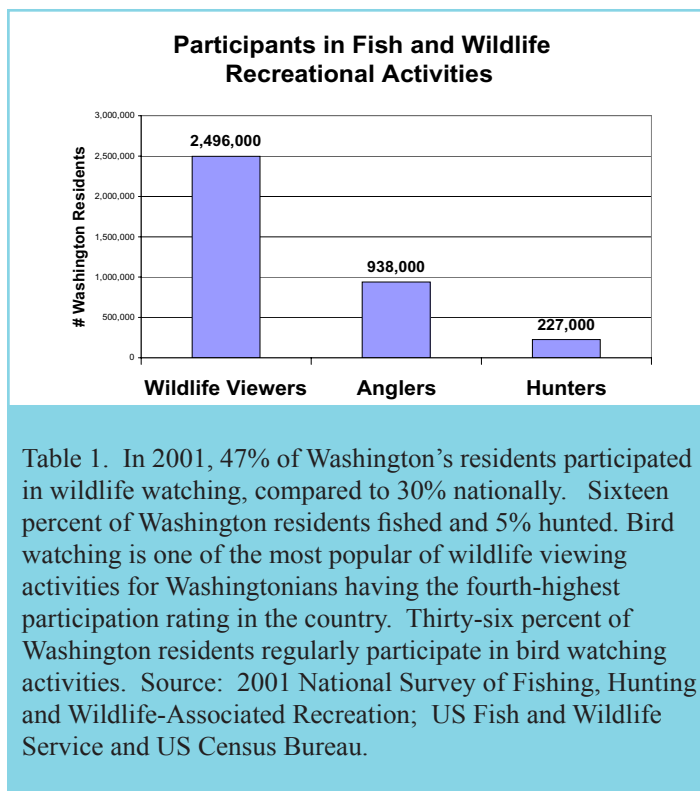
If done correctly, the community benefits are much broader than just an economic boost. A focus on wildlife viewing can help define a community and create pride. It identifies and communicates its authentic characteristics, helping market a community image while creating a unique story. And most importantly, it stimulates a desire to protect that which makes all these other benefits possible.

A successful wildlife viewing event or activity is also one that engenders stewardship among the participants and the promoters. Critical to the continued success of such an event is the continuing well-being of the wildlife and habitat that draws the visitors; and the community's foresight to protect its sacred places.

So, how is promotion of wildlife viewing both an economic stimulant and a habitat protection tool? To answer this we need to embrace a different paradigm. Instead of trying to educate people about wildlife for its intrinsic value, we can use wildlife viewing to educate them about wildlife's value to their community's economic life. Follow the dollars! Wildlife-related tourism brings money to rural areas. If this is recognized locally as a local economic asset, it is more likely to be protected.

## **Wildlife Viewing Economics**

Some remarkable and revealing data has emerged from the most recent US Fish and Wildlife Service National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation survey. Conducted by the US Bureau of Census, the survey provides national and state data on wildlife viewing activity and expenditures, which help explain why this



two-fold economic stimulant/habitat protection model may be possible.

There is great interest in wildlife viewing. In this 2001 survey, it was revealed that 47%, or 2.5 million Washington residents over 16 years old, participated in wildlife watching, compared to 30% nationally. Sixteen percent of Washington residents fished, and 5% hunted. Bird-watching is one of the most popular wildlife viewing activities for Washingtonians, with the fourth-highest participation rating in the country. Thirty-six percent of Washington residents regularly participate in bird watching activities.

This trend is mirrored nationally, with dramatic increases in numbers and percent of the population participating in bird watching.

This growing phenomenon has not escaped the mainstream press. Magazines such as Sunset Magazine and the American Automobile Association have had features on wildlife viewing opportunities in Washington.

Wildlife viewing in Washington is nearly a \$1 billion dollar per year business. Direct expenditures on wildlife viewing exceed fishing and hunting activities. The total economic output from wildlife watching in Washington, \$1.78 billion, is the 8th highest in the nation in this category.

Nationally, over 66 million people made trips primarily to view wildlife in 2001, spending \$38.4 billion and creating over 1 million jobs! Total economic output was \$95.8 billion, generating \$6.1 billion in state and federal tax revenue.

Those expenditures are primarily in two categories: equipment and travel expenses. Equipment expenses include binoculars, spotting scopes, cameras, film and developing, bird and other wildlife food, birdhouses, packs, tents, vehicles, magazines and books, membership dues and contributions, and plantings. Travel expenses include accommodations, restaurant eating and food stores, air and ground transportation, and recreation and retail sales.

Similar surveys were conducted in 1991, 1996 and 2001, showing substantial growth from \$650 million to \$1.09 billion in expenditures

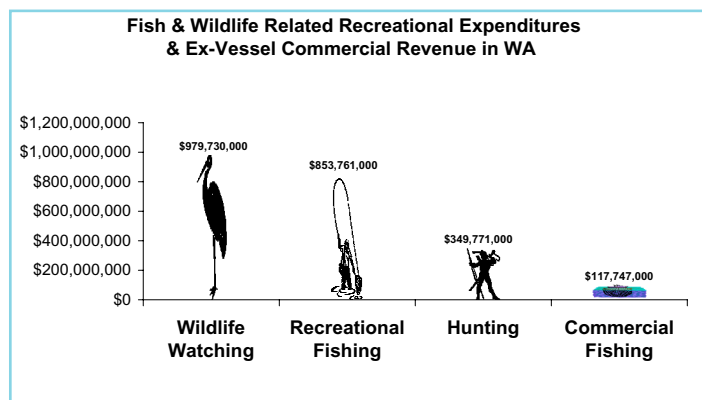


Table 2. Direct expenditures on wildlife viewing of over \$979 million exceed other fishing and hunting activities. The total economic output from wildlife watching in Washington, \$1.78 billion, is the 8th highest in the nation. Nationally, over 66 million people made trips primarily to view wildlife in 2001, spending \$38.4 billion and creating over 1 million jobs! Total economic output was \$95.8 billion, generating \$6.1 billion in state and federal tax revenue. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau; and a WDFW-PacFin Report.

over the previous decade (adjusted to constant 2001 dollars.)

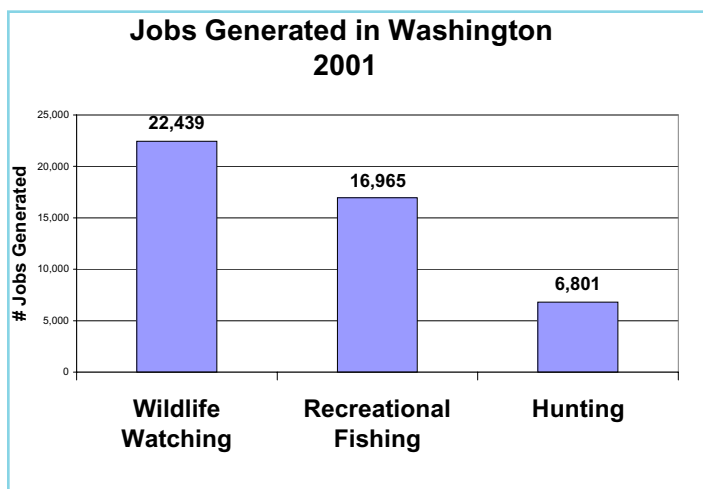


Table 3. Fish and wildlife recreation creates substantial numbers of jobs and generates an estimated \$528 million in earnings totaling .8% of total state employment and .5% of total state wage and salary disbursements. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau.

Wildlife viewing generates a substantial number of jobs! A variety of occupations benefit: wildlife tour operators, whale watching boat captains and deck hands, river rafting companies for eagles, government agency recreation staff, travel agents, Chambers of Commerce staff, local non-profit leaders, bird seed distributors, camera and binocular store salespersons, film processors, mail-order catalog companies, specialty equipment outlets, government land-owner staff, and many others. Occupations not normally associated with wildlife viewing, but having jobs provided as well are café wait-staff, gas station attendants, latte baristas, motel clerks, RV campground owners, car and kayak dealers, ferry system operators, book sellers, magazine writers, print-shop press operators, paper mills, delivery drivers, museums and newspapers, etc. Wildlife viewing provides part-time and full-time employment. When you take a little piece of one person's time and income, and combine it with thousands of other similar pieces, it adds up to over 22,000 jobs in Washington!

### Community Interest in Wildlife Viewing

Three current activities are driving the increase in interest in wildlife viewing in Washington: wildlife viewing festivals, scenic highways and birding trails. In fact, each is stimulating the others, creating a significant multiplier effect.

Statewide, there are now over 24 wildlife festivals, with more being added every year. This is up from 4 just a few years ago. In the Puget Sound region, over 14 festivals celebrate and educate on: endangered and threatened species and ecosystems, waterfowl and shorebirds, neo-tropical migrants, bald eagles, elk and orcas. Several festivals feature backyard wildlife habitat improvements that individual homeowners can achieve.

Some of the newer festivals to emerge include the Blaine Wings over Water Northwest Birding Festival, formerly the more narrowly-focused Brant Festival organized to draw attention to brant and the critical eel grass beds in Birch Bay; and the Quinault Roosevelt Elk Festival to highlight the rainforest, both in early April. International Migratory Bird Day on May 14 is also a major focus of activity for several cities and government agencies in the Puget Sound area. Another festival to launch in 2005 is the International Orca Fest of the San Juan Islands, focusing on education about the challenges and opportunities of orca recovery.

Contributing to this interest in birding festivals is the development of Audubon Washington's birding trails. Two have been completed, the North Cascades and Coulee Corridor, to rave reviews, interest and press attention. The Great Washington State Birding Trail is a self-guided automobile tour for bird watching. It is modeled after the successful bird watching trails in Florida and Texas. The plan is for seven driving loops covering the entire state of Washington. Each trail has a full-color map created to guide visitors to the 50 + best bird-watching sites that can be accessed by car. The maps provide paintings of the common birds to be seen and detailed information on where and when to find the birds. Under development in 2005 are two loops for western Washington, with the Olympic loop highlighting western Puget Sound and Hood Canal.

In early 2005, the economic impact of wildlife viewing was dramatically documented in Olympia when an

extremely rare Eurasian thrush spent January and February in a west-side Olympia neighborhood. Final estimates of spending by visitors in Thurston County exceed \$150,000, with visitors from almost every state making a special trip here.

### Wildlife Viewing Demographics

What's driving this growing interest in wildlife viewing? Like most states, the majority of Washington residents soon will be middle aged "Baby-boomers". People born between 1946 and 1964 are now approximately 50 years old and, along with their advancing maturity, have a new appreciation for "soft adventure" and the inclusion of meaningful educational experiences as an integral part of their travel. Baby Boomers are the dominant age group representing the urban naturalist lifestyle that is the ideal target for Washington State's visitor industry. Urban naturalists travel for the best in culture and history in an outdoor and natural environment that offers the opportunity for an "up close and personal" interaction with wildlife.

Statistics from the 2001 Survey clearly show the influence of the baby boom generation, with Washington significantly higher than the national average in interest in wildlife viewing.

In contrast to the more traditional fish and wildlife recreational activities, women represent a significant portion of participants in wildlife viewing activities. Complementing this finding, focus group research conducted by CTED has consistently demonstrated that women are also the primary information gatherers in a family setting. They are most likely to use the Internet to seek travel information to help the family make travel decisions.

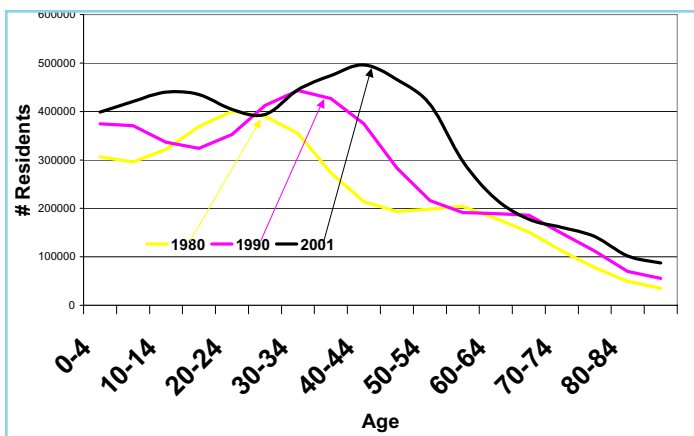


Table 4. Washington's Aging Population. Source: 2001 Washington State Data Book; Office of Financial Management.

Not surprisingly, eighty percent of wildlife viewers live in larger cities. Metropolitan centers also have the highest percentage of urban naturalist. These are sophisticated travelers who seek a connection with the natural environment because they often have little of it in their daily lives.

Currently the Puget Sound region is the largest source for visitors throughout Washington and this is reflected in wildlife viewers as well. It underscores the opportunity to expand the state's visitor base to attract more out-of-state as well as overseas consumers interested in a premium wildlife destination.

With an average age of 49, wildlife watchers tend to be at the height of their career, making a professional family wage, they are often empty-nesters with children having finished college, and many have paid off most loans and mortgages. A survey of visitors to the Great Texas Birding Trail found that the average household size is two. This is confirmed by visitor profile studies conducted by CTED that have consistently found the average travel

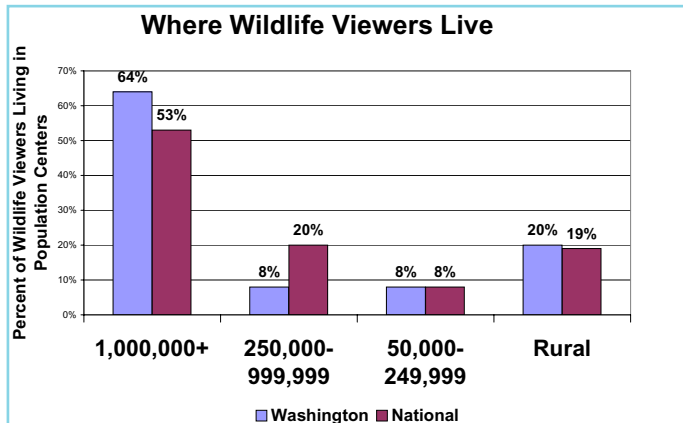


Table 5. Eighty percent of wildlife viewers live in large metropolitan areas, traveling to rural areas for viewing activities. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau.

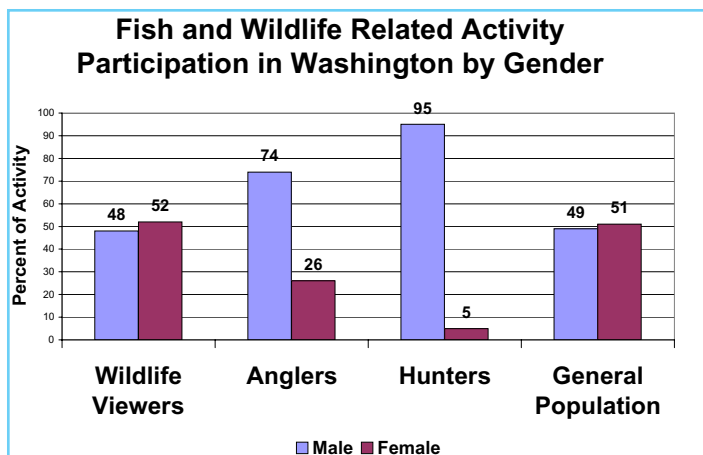


Table 6. Gender of participants compared to other activities. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau.

party consists of two adults. A characteristic of maturing populations is a peak of earning power as well as an increase in discretionary income. Wildlife viewers in Washington have higher incomes than is reflected by the national figures.

Wildlife watchers in Washington also tend to be highly educated. This is also confirmed by the state's travel target, the urban naturalist, substantiating the value of this lifestyle profile as a premium national and international target for wildlife viewing in Washington.

#### Subsequent Activities: Coalition Building and Partnerships

Among the many desired products identified in the plan that will significantly aid wildlife viewing tourism, while protecting its charm and resource base, the first to be adopted is the development of a detailed database inventory

of all existing wildlife viewing sites, including details on site ownership, positive attributes and any potential or existing problems. Both agencies will help develop this data, and the resulting information will be included in the [www.experiencewashington.com](http://www.experiencewashington.com) interactive map.

Originally, we thought that every two years beginning in 2005, we would conduct a conference on development of wildlife viewing opportunities and promotion. As a result of very strong feedback at the October 2004 Wildlife Viewing Conference in Soap Lake, we have decided to offer a conference annually. This year's will be held September 28-29 in Friday Harbor, and will facilitate input about local attractions into the CTED interactive mapping of wildlife viewing offerings. One of the benefits of an annual conference is the subsequent development of an informal Watchable Wildlife Coalition to continue providing direction and feedback to CTED and WDFW on the wildlife viewing industry.

The success of the original charge to the state agencies of Fish and Wildlife, and Community, Trade and Economic Development, has recently lead to an expanded set of partners who are committed to working together to further the goals of the wildlife viewing plan and watchable wildlife. Rounding out the list of partners are the state agencies of Parks and Transportation; and the nonprofit citizen-based Audubon Washington.

Many other agencies are involved in providing wildlife viewing recreation, including Washington State Parks Commission, Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington State Department of Transportation, Washington Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC), US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Bureau of Reclamation, NOAA/ Marine Fisheries Service/ Marine Sanctuaries, National Park Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, Tribes, Industrial Forest Companies, Audubon Washington, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, People for

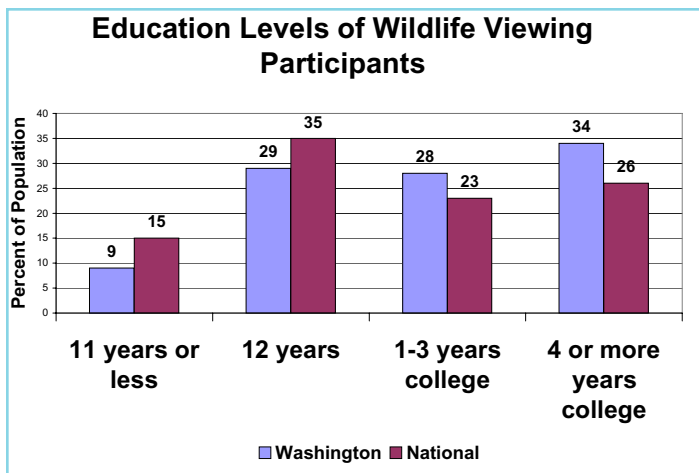


Table 7. Wildlife viewing participants are well educated, with 62% of Washington viewers having some college education. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau.



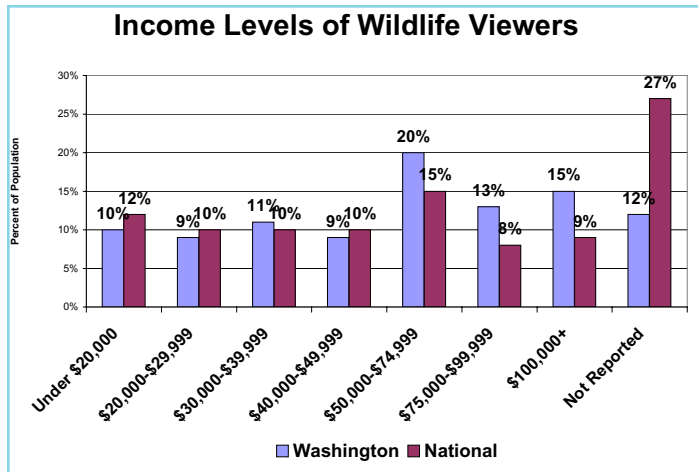


Table 8. A characteristic of maturing populations is a peak of earning power as well as an increase in discretionary income. Wildlife viewers in Washington have higher incomes than is reflected by national figures. Source: 2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation; US Fish and Wildlife Service and US Census Bureau.

Puget Sound, and Professional Association of Diving Instructors.

An extensive public review of the drafts surfaced many comments, the most significant being: don't forget the marine environment and divers; don't reduce hunting and fishing opportunity; support existing (struggling) efforts before creating new ones; and provide expertise and money to locals.

To assist groups and communities who want to get started in planning wildlife viewing opportunities, the WDFW created a Web site called "A Community Guide to Nature Tourism." This is a one-stop shopping area of best practices in planning and developing viewing sites and events.

All aspects of planning are covered, with statistics on nature tourism and tourists, conducting assessments of local attractions, writing and building a plan with significant local involvement and discussion on how to evaluate

whether the activity was effective or can be improved.

Our partners at CTED acquire detailed research on visitation and visitor behavior, and make this information and other resources available on their industry Web site.

Some of the complementary movements that are gaining interest and momentum are those that stimulate wildlife and environmentally friendly practices, by the viewers and the viewing industry. Examples include using sustainable building materials and low impact site designs, keeping forests and farms in forests and farms, rewarding private property owners for providing wildlife habitat, encouraging transportation alternatives to events, and to protect wildlife-rich areas.

In summary, the demographics of an ageing population are changing recreational interests, steering people to nature-based activities. Community awareness of natural assets and their values is growing. Wildlife viewing adds value to local the wildlife resources. This creates an opportunity to add "pocket book" reasons to protect wildlife and habitat. After all, isn't it all about the money?

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